

Lucia Scherzberg, *Zwischen Partei und Kirche: Nationalsozialistische Priester in Österreich und Deutschland (1938-1944)*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus Verlag 2020 (Religion und Moderne, Bd. 20), 645 S., 49,- €, ISBN: 978-3-593-51225-9

In *Zwischen Partei und Kirche*, Lucia Scherzberg, professor of systematic theology at Saarland University and co-editor of *theologie.geschichte*, studies a relatively small group of Catholic priests and select laity from Germany and Austria who actively promoted a positive relationship between the National Socialist state and the Catholic Church. In the book's introduction, among many questions, she asks,

„Handelte es sich um ein paar verrückte Fanatiker? Waren die Mitglieder isoliert oder fanden sie Unterstützung im übrigen Klerus“,

and

„Wie stark unterschieden sich die Priester in ihren Überzeugungen und Aktionen vom sonstigen Führungspersonal der Katholischen Kirche?“ (14).

Scherzberg finds that though they were fanatical in their support for National Socialism, these Catholic clerics and laity were far from deranged. Rather, they were intelligent, intensely calculating, and fully cognizant of their actions in support of Hitler and the Nazi government and party. Yet, as Scherzberg reveals, at times, their outlook was not always exceptional when compared with some of their fellow clergymen. Still, they made the ill-advised mistake of imperiously bucking the Church's hierarchical system by assuming roles and tasks traditionally reserved for the Church's episcopate, and thereby became *persona non grata* in their dioceses.

As I have shown in *Hitler's Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism*, there were approximately one-hundred-fifty 'brown priests' who publicly supported and aligned

themselves with National Socialism.¹ In my more broadly based work, I devoted a chapter to examining the National Socialist Priests' Group (NS-Priester) studied by Scherzberg. By contrast, Scherzberg spent years researching the NS-Priester's personalities, tracking down minute details, and uncovering extensive networks between and among them. Her research deepens our knowledge of the complexity of church-state relations under National Socialism and builds upon previous works such as *Hitler's Priests*. Additionally, the pioneering studies of the late contemporary witness Franz Loidl, professor of church history at the Catholic-Theological Faculty of the University of Vienna, provided Scherzberg with a basic introduction to the NS-Priester that included vital primary documents, though the study was limited in scope and often apologetic in analysis.² Josef Lettl's brief but impressive Diplomarbeit, *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für den religiösen Frieden 1938*, offered a general introduction to the initial but short-lived public organization of the NS-Priester.³ More recently, in *Hitlers Jünger und Gottes Hirten*, Eva Maria Kaiser examined a few of the leading NS-Priester in her study of the Austrian bishops' post-war advocacy for former National Socialists.⁴ In

¹ Kevin P. Spicer, *Hitler's Priests: Catholic Clergy and National Socialism*, DeKalb, IL, 2008; vgl. „Gesplante Loyalität. ‚Braune Priester‘ im Dritten Reich am Beispiel der Diözese Berlin“, übersetzt von Ilse Andrews, *Historisches Jahrbuch* 122 (2002), S. 287-320.

² z.B. Franz Loidl, *Religionslehrer Johann Pircher. Sekretär und aktivster Mitarbeiter in der ‚Arbeitsgemeinschaft für den religiösen Frieden‘ 1938*, Vienna 1972; ders., Hg., *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für den religiösen Frieden 1938/1939. Dokumentation*, 1. Teil, Vienna 1973; ders., Hg., *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für den religiösen Frieden 1938/1939. Ergänzungsdokumentation*, 2. Teil, Vienna 1973.

³ Lettl was a former student of Rudolf Zinnhobler, professor of church history at the katholische Privatuniversität Linz. Josef Lettl, *Die Arbeitsgemeinschaft für den religiösen Frieden 1938*, Diplomarbeit, Linz 1981.

⁴ Eva Maria Kaiser, *Hitlers Jünger und Gottes Hirten: Der Einsatz der katholischen Bischöfe Österreichs für ehemalige Nationalsozialisten nach 1945*, Wien/Köln/Weimar 2017.

the end, Scherzberg's study is authoritative and will become a standard work.

Scherzberg uses the 1938 *Anschluss* to divide her work into two parts that contain headings but without chapter numbers. In the first part, Scherzberg identifies the original members of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für den religiösen Frieden* (AGF), the initial rendering of the NS-Priester that became public after the March 1938 Anschluss. The AGF consisted of both lay and ordained Catholics, primarily under the leadership of three individuals: Johann Pircher, a former religious of the Deutsch-Orden who had incardinated into the Vienna archdiocese in 1921 and joined the NSDAP in 1933; Wilhelm van den Bergh, a former Capuchin friar from the Netherlands who like Pircher had incardinated into the Vienna archdiocese in 1929; and Karl Pischiak, a lay Catholic, National Socialist, and *SA-Sturmbannführer* who had ties with Josef Bürckel, *Reichskommissar für die Wiedervereinigung Österreichs mit dem Reich* (1938-1939) and *Reichsstatthalter* and *Gauleiter* of Vienna (1939-1940). According to Scherzberg, the AGF developed from the remnants of several Catholic pro-Anschluss groups. The same individuals had also been entangled in more politically aligned extreme right-wing associations such as "die Katholisch-Nationalen", *Deutscher Klub*, and *Deutsche Gemeinschaft*. Many of these same individuals had likewise been involved in the post-war Catholic youth movement, which had been heavily influenced by the writings of theologian Michael Pfliegler. Pfliegler criticized political Catholicism and emphasized the importance of the Church's pastoral mission, especially to promote peace between church and state. Youth associations such as *Reichsbund Jungösterreich*, *Bund Neuland*, and *Quickborn* rejected the Peace Treaty of St. Germain-en-Laye (1919), supported a Groß-Deutschland, and embraced various forms of antisemitism, though generally not racial. Many of their members also rejected the Austrian *Ständestaat*, especially the close alignment between the Austrian Catholic Church and the Dollfuß and Schuschnigg governments. Catholic priests from Styria, whose borders had been

affected by the 1919 treaty, particularly rejected the situation of post-war Austria. Scherzberg provides a comprehensive overview of Austria's pre-*Anschluss* history to contextualize the AGF's foundation.

Before the 10 April 1938 *Volksabstimmung* on the *Anschluss*, the Austrian bishops issued a solemn declaration that expressed their goodwill towards National Socialism. The Holy See, however, was not pleased by the stance of the Austrian episcopate, especially after the encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge*, that criticized the German state's encroachment on the rights of the Catholic Church. On 8 April 1938, *Schmerzensfreitag*, many of the individuals who were predisposed to form the AGF, issued a letter directed to Cardinal Theodor Innitzer, archbishop of Vienna, in support of the *Anschluss* and critical of the Vatican. Eight days later, on 17 April, Pircher, van den Bergh, and two other priests in the name of the AGF issued a public appeal to the Catholic clergy to support the political developments between Austria and the German Reich. Newspapers covered it and reported that the appeal allegedly resonated with the clergy. Immediately, Jakob Weinbacher, Innitzer's secretary, made it known that he did not approve. As early as May 1938, the Vienna *Diözesanblatt* reminded clergy that they were not to be involved in politics and should limit their realm of activity to the pastoral sphere. On 30 September 1938, Cardinal Innitzer ordered diocesan newspapers to announce a ban against the AGF. Pircher and van den Bergh were never personally informed beforehand. In October 1938, Pircher issued a statement carried by Austrian newspapers that announced the disbandment of the AGF.

Scherzberg's argument reveals that the prohibition was not due solely to a question of tactics or a difference of opinion about applying them that led to the AGF's ban. Instead, one could attribute it more to the nature and function of the diocesan hierarchical structure, whereby only a bishop or his delegate speaks in the name of the Church. The ban also took place during a period of tense church-state conflict as the two sides negotiated for power in annexed Austria. With pressure

on his back from the Holy See to assert the rights of the Church and to critique National Socialism, Innitzer could not allow a renegade group of priests to speak for his diocese. Pircher and van den Bergh were not alone. Pircher claimed that 525 priests were members, and an additional 1844 expressed their support (out of 8,000 priests in Austria). Scherzberg finds that these numbers may not be entirely overstated. Through meticulous research, she identifies at least 150 priests who joined the AGF and offers convincing arguments about the missing individuals not accounted for.

Around the time of the AGF's prohibition, a power struggle ensued between Pircher and Pischtiak. Scherzberg speculates that Pischtiak used his connections with Bürckel to have the Gestapo confiscate the AGF's membership index from its headquarters in Pircher's home. At this point, it might have been helpful if Scherzberg had also analyzed the contemporary lay-cleric dynamics in this power struggle. Nevertheless, in the end, Scherzberg reveals that Pircher proved more skillful at power-play, apparently enjoying a more significant share of Bürckel's trust. Pischtiak then separated himself from the AGF and disappeared from the historical record.

Even though the AGF had formally disbanded, Pircher refused to let go of his dream to create a mass organization for priests within the NSDAP structure. Moving underground, Pircher maintained his contacts with like-minded priests. In a November 1938 letter to a former AGF member, he declared that the NS-Priester needed to retain,

„versöhnenden, vermittelnden und staatsbejahenden Ideen [bis] auch in religiöser Hinsicht ein modus vivendi erreicht sein wird“ (228).

He was not alone. Pfarrer, Richard Hermann Bühler, a retired priest of the Limburg diocese, suggested that they establish an “*NS Religionsdiener-Verband*“ that would educate in the clergy in a National Socialist spirit. Yet, in the disbanded AGF world, these efforts had little practical impact as the actual group of priests dwindled over time to a select few.

Amid this post-AGF climate, in December 1938, Pircher travelled to Köln to meet for the first time Richard Kleine, a priest of the Hildesheim diocese and religion teacher at the Duderstadt Gymnasium. Though the specific origins of their initial contact are unknown, Kleine would become a leading figure among the NS-Priester as well as its primary theorist. Kleine's entry along with others would also broaden the group's geographic scope, enlarging it from its primarily Austrian locale to a broader demographic reach that would encompass the Greater German Reich.

Scherzberg's research reveals a great deal more about Kleine than previous studies uncovered. To avoid scandal over Kleine's illegitimate birth, he had to be ordained for Hildesheim instead of his home diocese of Köln. Likewise, he was rejected as a *Feldgeistlicher* in the First World War. While not overemphasizing these points, Scherzberg speculates that they had an impact on his self-perception and world outlook. Still, Kleine had further influences. His professor, Arnold Rademacher, a specialist in fundamental theology at the University of Bonn, advocated for both church reform and the reunification in faith among the Christian denominations. In the same vein, at University of Tübingen, Wilhelm Koch, professor of dogmatics and apologetics and a progressive intellectual, provided Kleine with a religious worldview that contrasted with the dominant neo-scholastic approach of his era. Accused of the heresy of modernism, Koch ended up leaving teaching and returned to full-time pastoral ministry. The impact of Rademacher and Koch on Kleine would especially be felt when Kleine raised issues that preoccupied him and shared them with members of the NS-Priester.

In addition to Pircher, Kleine, van den Bergh, and Bühler, other prominent members included Alois Nikolussi, a priest of the Trient diocese who in 1919 became a Chorrer of St. Augustine at Stift Sankt Florian; Simon Pirchegger, a priest of the Graz-Seckau diocese, a Dozent of Slavic Studies at University of Bonn, and an NSDAP member; Joseph Mayer, an Augsburg priest and professor of moral theology

at *Theologische Fakultät* Paderborn; and Adolf Herte, a Paderborn priest and a professor of church history and patristics also at Paderborn. As Scherzberg's previous works have also shown, Karl Adam, professor of systematic theology at the University of Tübingen, later joined this group.⁵ A few Catholic laymen were also involved, including Josef Bagus, editor of the *Kolpingblatt*, and Alois Brücker, an editor and NSDAP member living in Köln. For each of these individuals, Scherzberg provides extensive background information to contextualize their support of National Socialism and initial contact with Pircher and Kleine. Additionally, she concludes the first part of her study by discussing the theological positioning of the group. The individual egos of the group's members, along with the intermittent commitment of each, did not easily lead to consensus on religious questions. Pircher, for example, remained obsessed and convinced of the group's ability to influence the outlook of high-ranking National Socialists on the Church. Kleine became fixated on an antisemitic interpretation of Christ's Sermon on the Mount, interpreting it as a declaration of war on Judaism. Finally, Mayer and Herte appeared reluctant in their involvement, having to be nudged along by Pircher.

Part two of the work focuses on the activities of the NS-Priester, who never agreed on an official name for the group. The outbreak of war for Germany, with its decisive initial victories and subsequent harsh defeats, created a radicalization in the group's outlook. Scherzberg's systematic theological expertise is evident throughout her writing, especially in part two, as she analyzes the publications and presentations of the group's members. Most chilling is the parallel she draws between the NS-Priester's antisemitism, which led members to advocate the removal of references to Jews in Catholic sacramental rites, and the dormant antisemitism among members

⁵ Lucia Scherzberg, *Kirchenreform mit Hilfe des Nationalsozialismus. Karl Adam als kontextueller Theologe*, Darmstadt 2001, and dies., *Karl Adam und der Nationalsozialismus*, Saarbrücken 2011 (theologie.geschichte, Beiheft 3).

of a subcommittee dealing with liturgical reform in the Fulda Bishops' Conference who discussed and similarly advocated for the removal of Jewish names from the marriage rite. Though the German bishops never agreed upon a revised rite for the sacraments under National Socialism, one did appear in 1948, with the Jewish names discussed above removed.

The ideas of the NS-Priester appeared in *Kameradschaftlicher Gedankenaustausch* (KG), a newsletter that ran inconsistently for twenty-seven issues from September 1939 to January 1945. With the help of a Catholic laywoman, Pircher edited and distributed each issue that typically was four pages in length. Pircher published most articles with pseudonyms. Nevertheless, Scherzberg spends significant time and does crucial detective work identifying the authors of the contributions. The KG's language was overtly nationalistic and repeatedly implored its readers to serve their fatherland faithfully, especially in wartime. Increasingly in each issue, the KG's language also became more militant and antisemitic. Alongside the KG, on his own initiative, from 1938-1940, Pircher wrote *Informationen zur kulturpolitischen Lage*, mirroring the SD's *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, in which he reported on church issues that he believed would be of interest to the state. He shared the reports with Gauleiter Bürckel, who, it appears, for a brief time financially supported Pircher's efforts. Despite their actions and National Socialist worldview, Pircher and Kleine had little sympathy for priests who proposed a more radical course for the Church's clergy, such as abandoning clerical celibacy. Likewise, Pircher revealed his allegiance to Catholicism by including criticisms of the state's treatment of the Catholic Church in his reports. He confided to Kleine that he might end up in Dachau for his more critical comments. Two separate party proceedings to remove Pircher from the NSDAP were eventually introduced, but neither succeeded.

The efforts of the NS-Priester brought them in contact with like-minded clergy and laity from other Christian denominations, and even in contact with representatives of völkisch non-Christian groups. Kleine pursued unification efforts with

the *Nationalkirchliche Bewegung Deutsche Christen* (DC), and with the *Völkisch-Religiöse Gemeinschaft* nurtured by Ernst Graf von Reventlow from Potsdam. Though Kleine at first was taken aback by the involvement of a few former Catholic clergymen in the DC, he soon adjusted and began to work with them. The dialogue that ensued led to a series of meetings where the participants attempted to work out the significant obstacles that existed between them. Scherzberg painstakingly analyses the discussion at these meetings and the individuals involved. Due to numerous factors, nothing of note resulted in the end. However, Kleine did receive an invitation from the Protestant biblical studies professor, Walter Grundmann, to join his *Institut zur Erforschung und Beseitigung des jüdischen Einflusses auf das deutsche kirchliche Leben*, which he accepted. As a result, Kleine's antisemitism became more radical and even at one point promoted an ecclesiastical solution parallel to the 'Final Solution' of the 'Jewish Question'.

Kleine's work with the DC led him into contact with the Mecklenburg *Landesbischof* Walther Schultz, who was sympathetic to Klein's ecumenical efforts. Kleine also sought a similar collaborator from the Catholic side and believed he had found one in the newly appointed archbishop of Paderborn, Lorenz Jaeger, a former *Wehrmachtspfarrer*. While a previous biography has been sympathetic to Jaeger's choices under National Socialism⁶, Scherzberg's findings reveal that while Jaeger was staunchly nationalist and open to listening, in the end, he rejected Kleine's efforts at a joint Protestant-Catholic Pastoral Letter and refused to sanction Kleine's understanding of church and ecumenism. Yet, Kleine did succeed in bringing together Schultz and Jaeger to a meeting with him to discuss the pastoral letter. A research project on Jaeger is ongoing in the Paderborn archdiocese.

⁶ Heribert Grub, *Erzbischof Lorenz Jaeger als Kirchenführer im Dritten Reich. Tatsachen-Dokumente-Entwicklungen-Kontext-Probleme*, Paderborn 1995.

As the war turned for the worse for Germany, the NS-Priester became more embittered, and their antisemitism proportionally increased. In their voluminous correspondence, they condemned the 1943 Decalogue Letter, which was critical of the state and adopted by the plenary assembly of the Fulda Bishops' Conference. Scherzberg concludes that the worsening of the war situation and the party's dwindling attention and notice given to the NS-Priester led to this escalation. One might also perceive that the radical antisemitism was always present, and that the apocalyptic situation at the end of the war provided the impetus for the priests to express their views more openly and, in turn, attempt to prove their allegiance even more. After the war, most of the known members of the NS-Priester, centered around Pircher and Kleine went through some form of denazification and lost their positions. The lay members, less so. Yet, Scherzberg reveals that none dropped their racist National Socialist views, but instead, merely suppressed them.

In her introduction, Scherzberg offered a theoretical framework that included the sociological theories of (de)-differentiation, (de)-secularization, and (re)-sacralization, to understand and evaluate how the priests interacted with the church and state. She returned to this framework in her conclusion. For Scherzberg, the priests she studied lived in a differentiated and often secularized society, operating within their own independent sub-system. She continued,

„Sie forderten freie Religionsübung, die Freiheit der Kirche und Gewissensfreiheit. Staat und Kirche waren in ihrem Verständnis für getrennte Bereiche zuständig – der Staat für das Volkwohl, die Kirche für das Seelenheil der Menschen. Konsequenterweise lehnten die Mitglieder der Gruppe Übergriffe des Staates oder der Parteiinstanzen auf die Kirche und die Ausübung der Religion ab“ (559-600).

Yet, in their own way and according to their values, the priests were traditional, upholding priestly celibacy and religious education. Often, they wanted the best of both worlds,

rejecting political Catholicism while still hoping to influence political and social processes. At the same time, they were willing to accept the state's oversight in areas such as the training of clergy.

Scherzberg also considered how the polycratic nature of the NS-State, especially evident in the leadership of Vienna's *Reichsstatthalter* and *Gauleiter* Josef Bürckel and Baldur von Schirach, affected the NS-Priester. Like many Germans, the NS-Priester did not blame Hitler for the persecution of the Church. Instead, they relegated the responsibility to lower-level National Socialists or more likely than not to clergy themselves for not supporting the party and state. While not identifying state leadership style as polycracy, the NS-Priester attempted to benefit from the regionally differentiated leadership approaches at-large by courting Bürckel and Schirach with varying levels of success. Finally, Scherzberg considered the role that masculinity and comradeship played in the relational milieu that NS-Priester fostered. Most of the NS-Priester, for example, bought into the overtly militaristic language of the time, with some taunting or jeering the hesitancy of fellow priests to act, accusing the latter of a breach in masculinity. The comradesly address shared between them and displayed boldly on their newsletter, however, ultimately had little weight as conflict and doubt arose among them. In the end, according to Scherzberg, they appear to be lone agents out for themselves and only brought together by a prevailing ideology. Each seemed willing to sell out the other, if necessary, to become more recognized by National Socialist leadership.

Lucia Scherzberg has produced an excellent study that should be widely read. It significantly helps the reader to understand the dangers of extreme nationalism and the temptations to misshape religion for personal and political gain.

Kevin P. Spicer